



Notes from Underground

Fyodor Dostoevsky

Study Guide



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Characters

The Underground Man

Dostoevsky says that the Underground Man, though a fictional character, is representative of certain people who "not only may but must exist in our society, taking

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under consideration the circumstances under which our society has generally been formed." The Underground Man is extremely alienated from the society in which he lives. He feels himself to be much more intelligent and "conscious" than any of the people he meets. However, he is aware that his consciousness often manifests itself as a skepticism that prevents him from having confidence in any of his actions. This skepticism cripples him and keeps him from participating in "life" as other people do. The Underground Man constantly analyzes and second-guesses every thought and feeling he has. He is therefore incapable of making decisions about anything.

Feeling himself to be inferior to more active, less intelligent people, the Underground Man goes through life full of shame and self-loathing. This feeling of inadequacy before others is enhanced by the fact that, as an orphan, he has never had normal, loving relationships with other people. Having no real life experiences upon which to base his hopes and expectations, he often relies on the conventions of novels and drama. The contrast between his expectations for life—which are based on literature—and the realities of the world he lives in is often great, and this divide alienates the Underground Man from society still further. The only emotional interactions he can have with others involve anger, bitterness, revenge, and humiliation. He can conceive of love only as the total domination of one person over another. In order to feel that he has participated in life in some way, he often instigates conflict with others and subjects himself to profound humiliation. This humiliation actually gives the Underground Man a sense of

satisfaction and power, as he has brought about the humiliation himself. As long as he can exercise his will, he does not care if the outcome is positive or negative.

We meet the Underground Man when he is forty years old, having retired from his civil service job and secluded himself in a shabby apartment. By this point, he is a complete nihilist: he has no desire to interact with others, and he has total contempt for society and everyone who is part of it. In the second part of the novel, however, the Underground Man describes himself as he was sixteen years earlier, at the age of twenty-four. As a young man, the Underground Man is already misanthropic, proud, self-effacing, and bitter, but he also still clings to certain ideals. He is passionate about literature, craves human attention, and wants others to respect and admire him for his intelligence and passion. He is also occasionally subject to fits of idealism. In the course of the second part of the novel, however, we see how the Underground Man's inability to interact with other people causes his attempts to form relationships and participate in life to end in disaster, and drives him deeper underground.

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